

# DREI

*A Crooked World* compiles works by Whitney Clafin, Matthias Groebel, David Ostrowski, Coumba Samba, Julia Scher, Josef Strau, and Anna Virnich, all of whom contributed and continue to contribute in different ways to the expansion of the landscape of abstract painting. While themselves remaining abstract, the works on view show their connection to landscape (an ever rich source for abstraction and summer exhibitions alike) along the keyboard of “approximations”, colors, mental topographies, formal concepts, scenes, and tech revolutions. In the close connection of the participating artists with the cities of New York and Cologne, the exhibition takes up one of the most important axes in recent art history. The title refers to a recent painting by Whitney Clafin, inspired by the Silver Jews album cover for *American Water* - a quintessential depiction of an American freeway. Clafin’s painting transformed this scene into a depiction of a sun/moon/orb with its reflection on the ground off center... “Because the world is crooked” (Whitney Clafin, 2022).

For **Whitney Clafin** (b. 1983, Providence, RI, United States) painting is always an open ended. Her works embody their own mood, so much so that the mood becomes a being itself. She gives body to conflict, amplifies subjectivity, and highlights the feedback-looping maximalisms of the moment. Non paint materials are collected from her everyday and contribute to a work which is useful to think of as “mostly painting” – a guide, a mix tape, asking you to consider one thing and then the next while you still have the last thing stuck in your head.

*Monuments Blinking* (2023) - one of two new paintings on view - is named after the Q and Not U song “End the Washington Monument (Blinks) Goodnight”, “because I thought of the grid as a cityscape and the various colors of the squares blinking on and off at the viewer. It also references an older, or, “vintage” color palette- the Klee originally, and then the late 90s coffee shop aesthetic of saturated earth tones. I saw Q and Not U play at AS220 in Providence, which is an iconic alternative cafe venue, and was trying to locate the painting in that environment... It looks like cafe art on purpose, if that makes sense.” (Whitney Clafin)

In review, **Matthias Groebel’s** (b. 1958, Aachen, Germany) practice can be considered a radical counter-position to the “post-studio painting” that manifested itself in Cologne in the early 1990s and became part of the International canon. His paintings differ from conventional paintings in their machine-assisted production. New technology came to market in the 1980s, allowing analog television waves to be transferred into digital computer pixels; inspired by this, Groebel used found photocopiers and windshield-wiper motors to construct a complex machine, able to transfer TV images onto canvas via an airbrush gun and a multi-step, mechanized paint application process. Extracted and appropriated from the constant flow of the 1980s and 1990s television, these images possess an ambivalent, mysterious, and physical presence that emits a profound psychological latency.

“As with my previous works, television images serve as the source material for the images of the work group ‘Hacked Channels’. These special television images are transmitted encoded via satellite, the associated decoders may not be legally operated in Germany. A number of programs are made available on hacker sites on the internet, which attempt to reconstruct the original television images from the transmitted signals. Far from their self-imposed goal of perfect decoding, the software delivers flickering, dancing, mostly monochrome structures in which the recognizable image fragments are repeatedly lost. These images are not abstract, for they do not abstract; on the contrary, they are stuck, as it were, on the reverse path before the actual figure is found. Transposed into painting, they develop a peculiar spatiality, which I hereby introduce into my work as an alternative to the representation of space hitherto gained exclusively through the representation of the body. At the same time they complement the “Anatomy of Forgetting” by a chapter about the origin of hallucinations.” (Matthias Groebel, August 1999)

**David Ostrowski** (b. 1981, Cologne) has produced a body of work that revolves around the idea of the zero point—a place of nothingness or the beyond of cultural and painterly codes. Ostrowski’s paintings are products of a desire to eliminate painterly knowledge. They are expressions of the idea that in producing notions of emptiness, one also grapples with and comments on the history of painting. The Cologne-based artist’s light-handed and complex approaches to the non-motif open the space of the canvas to unique breaches of perception and an unexpected freedom of seeing.

His minimal, gestural works abandon both the traditions of figuration and the conventions of abstraction. Their tension derives from an irreducible pictorial uncertainty. Ostrowski consistently refuses to comply with the usual criteria for creating value in contemporary art: material value, painterly bravura,

conceptual references, institutional critique, ties to intellectual discourse, or forced self-referentiality. His works thwart not only any desire for interpretation, but often even the attempt to classify or catalogue them. Like many of his paintings, *F (Sky’s the limit)* (2014) is titled F - a letter that some commentators have interpreted to stand for “failure” or *Fehlermalerei* (“error painting”). This is the first time the painting is exhibited publicly.

**Coumba Samba** (b. 2000, New York City) is an interdisciplinary artist based in London, UK. Her work is rooted in studying process, hybridity, materiality and modes of visual communication. Samba investigates the uneasy relationships between the durable and the temporary against a backdrop of uncertainty and accelerated cultural consumption.

In *Rubber Door (for Box)* (2023) a sheet of stretched rubber is pasted and pinned onto a found wooden door. The rubber is painted in fluorescent yellow - a colour commonly used in industrial construction as a marker for gas and oil work. Samba interrogates oppression systems and recycling of narratives that exist within the capitalist enterprise, drawing on her brother’s experience of systemic incarceration to building work. Striping domestic and functional materials of their intent and definition to build them up again in a questioning of language and relations. Box is an ongoing assemblage piece with parts that will never meet; forever estranged, telling the same story.

A self-proclaimed “closet painter,” **Julia Scher** (b. 1954, Los Angeles) is most widely known for her work in performance and video installation. The three early works on display tether the beginnings of the artist’s interest in surveillance to her landscape painting practice of the 1980s. Upon receiving her first video camera, Scher began to conceptualize landscape through painting and video.

*Security Landscape of the Year* (1982/ 2012) is based on repurposed landscape paintings from 1982. In 2012, Scher sliced open some of her early, large-scale works to mount live feed cam- eras and monitors inside. The gesturally sketched landscapes have a dark, apocalyptic mood – something that also appears in the artist’s *Toxic Landscapes* (1980–82) photographs – that is intensified by the presence of live footage from a surveillance camera. The camera focuses on what is happening in front of the painting and transmits it to the monitor, allowing viewers to see themselves on the monitor as they stand in front of the work. This approach adds a medial quality to the relationship between the landscape painting and the viewer. The genesis of the work harkens back to the pre-selfie era, to the days of Super 8mm film, VHS, and cameras unconnected to smartphones.

**Josef Strau’s** (b. 1957, Vienna) tin and wire works on canvas are approximations of paintings, as the artist describes them. Made from thin sheets of metal plied into ridges and furrows and soldered into place, the works’ varied textures and visible fastenings assert their own topography. Strau heightens that link to landscape through a horizontal orientation: splayed out like a map, each painting evokes other kinds of lateral movement, like daily circuits through the city.

*New Angel 6* (2021) is part of a series of “Angel” and “New Angel” paintings, produced with the preconceived intent of following a rather impossible, maybe even questionable attempt to depict the celestial beings as if they were a real object entirely defined by space. They were burnt and cut with a hot soldering stick out of natural tin and cover the fragmentarily painted and colored canvases. But as Giorgio Agamben described and more recently revived, angels are rather defined within modes of time and appear to repair what’s left from the past. The painting is accompanied by a text poster and a new photo retouch work.

**Anna Virnich’s** (b. 1984, Berlin) work draws on a wide range of materials and formal references. The textile tableaux however mark the center of her multi-media practice. Her approach to painting is unconventional in that it to the biggest extent involves the rejection of paint itself in favor of textiles reflecting a history of use, and renouncing its traditional support - the canvas - in favor of a work which wavers between the formal parameters of painting and sculpture. The surfaces must be understood as in a state of constant inter-penetration, pervaded like a ghost and part of a network of an exchange of substances, technology, bodies, images and the light of your eyes.

The two works on view are part of a small series of paintings based on used textiles from a cloth factory in Sri Lanka. They show traces of human use such as sweat stains and a grid of lines created by folding and exposure to the sun.

# KÖLN



*A Crooked World*  
Drei, Cologne  
June 30 - July 29, 2023



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Josef Strau  
Engel mit Korrekturen, 2023  
Text on poster  
84 × 59,5 cm (33 1/8" × 23 3/8")

not  
make  
any cut  
at all. Same  
as last time,  
same size, same  
amount, but with  
the intention of  
restoring the former work,  
to make it better. That  
should be the real meaning  
of the term retrospective, to  
decipher the bad patterns that I  
involved in my art practice and to  
confess them by ways of repair.

One day for instance I had none  
of the tin metal left to use as skin from the  
former tattoo inspired angel images, only the  
many small tin metal trash pieces on the still so untidy  
studio floor that had fallen from the metal cutting. So I  
soldered the leftovers together like fabric waste.

I used to believe I make echoes of icon paintings,  
instead I had been using this as an art practice to act  
out the most toxic parts of my personality. I enjoyed  
cutting metals without an idea. I raved in stroking  
and beating them, then I excelled in further  
trampling on them, torturing them with the  
knives that I was suddenly collecting. When  
considering colors, I chose colors but  
not according to their visual or tonal  
qualities, but because of their smell  
when they are burnt, preferring  
some chemically ugly enamels,  
which smell mostly ugly – misery, I  
sometimes becoming praised my alchemical acts  
aware of their toxic as necessary ingredients for any artistic  
interior creation. Icon painting is supposed to be writing, I claimed  
with the burning metals and the smoking enamels compounded in  
the incredible and poisonous stench turning into long garlands of mysterious  
texts, or at least into letters that are being written into my room or spun slowly into  
the canvas of my lungs.

I did not become aware of the structure of the destructive aspect of my ways  
of making art for years. If it had been another artist I would have seen and readily despised such  
expressions of toxic personality traits. As it's famously been said, the devil enjoys it if we  
reject bad patterns in someone else most of all, and therefore makes it most difficult to  
detect them in oneself. In simple words, I started to learn from observing the  
following inherent condition of my acts and wanted to listen in search of invoking  
their imminent and sustainable changes. The very day after I abandoned  
new qualities the idea of both the cut in my production and the competitive  
I abandoned the interior cut I finally left the ex nihilo fantasy  
cutting, the trampling, the behind. I learned even more so that in times of  
burning, the hurting, production challenges I necessarily gravel  
through the ruthlessly harsh closed  
Early on I remembered seeing closed spaces too often as  
older drawings of angels made in an Art space of my interior tunnel of work  
Nouveau manner, for instance, a certain obsessions and most accordingly  
angel painting by Simeon Solomon of an live in exteriorly narrow  
angel protecting three boys illustrating the book of closed spaces too often as  
Daniel and how they are kept mercifully safe from the if they had chosen me. In the moment  
horrible danger of being killed by the soldiers of of revelation, to declare  
the Babylonian king as punishment for their refusal with it the beginning  
to obey. A story that reminds one that the supernatural angelic of my new direction,  
spirit blesses such disobedience. Similarly, the I weaved the tiny  
meaning of retrospective could materialize the angelic spirit that metal leftovers  
does not desire to look into the future but turns backwards and together  
attempts to repair what has already been done smoothly  
Usually, whenever I met some person randomly who asked where I into new  
am from and then later what I do patterns  
and I saw it was a person with a real job, hard working, as if  
felt I just could not tell them anything about me, as I had not  
done real work ever, I felt. So I often maneuvered around,  
stuttered, until they looked at me in this certain way, and  
then suddenly it was all over, doors closed, chance lost.

Loving to meet and open up to people, but feeling so guilty, I  
know by now how uncomfortable that feels because now it all  
changed for me as I got the same question again at the corner  
near my house and this time I just said that I am an artist, and  
as always the other asked "what kind of an artist?" and then  
"what do you paint?" I paused with all my courage and said  
"I paint angels." Finally I no longer needed to hide, I was  
not maneuvering, not feeling low, and I happily repeated  
it. Stepping back in excitement, the person on the street  
said: "That is the most amazing thing I ever heard of."  
And asked further: "And you are living from that?"  
"Yes I live from it." Since then some people in my  
neighborhood finally really know about me by  
now – and since opening up I have no fears  
anymore about saying whatever I feel, because it is  
no longer the strange confession  
of being an angel painter,  
but the intuition of the to  
me so unrecognized  
and earlier perceived as  
unproductive love  
that is  
contained  
within  
them.

First, I  
wished  
to paint  
an angel  
because of  
the guardian  
often placed  
above the bed of  
children. It could  
possibly be the first  
painted image they had seen, and  
maybe even their first view  
into an exterior imagination,  
into another world, or  
possibly behind it.

At that time I wanted this  
imagined guardian to be the first image  
made for one of my exhibitions. And then I  
hoped to see what would be "demanded" during  
and by the process, hopefully more of the same  
image. After this prototype, the first angel, all the  
other works in the exhibition would follow  
automatically through such an exercise.

A prototype is in relation to a serial  
production where the series is still being made as  
the application of a certain craft. The long and  
painful time spent within the rituals before the  
"birth" of the first image I tried many times  
before, but here I followed, although still  
only a little, some of the rules I had  
been learning recently from the  
training of Russia's mystical icon  
idolatry to use painters. I understood that  
the typical Byzantine painters' somehow I was being  
subject matter without having their necessary faith restricted by my  
and intensity. During my own introspection I found that maybe rejection and  
I could develop such necessary interior faith when choosing fear of  
to "project" an angel as subject matter. To my surprise, while reading the old  
icon school books, I learned it was once a rule in the second step of the training  
that was proposed to the scholar to paint an angel and only later to include other  
sacred persons or objects. It should be most natural to almost anyone to imagine the  
angel and to have faith in it, but as well to invoke one and as a result to establish its  
presence.

Though, I realized my decision was not to try to make icons, or credulously  
assuming such a role model for myself too fast, but to, at the very least, be able to elaborate  
reproduce some sort of reminder or echo, triggering a memory work times.  
of them, remembering and recounting the model of the truly The arduous  
observant icon-painter who isn't supposed to claim metal appearance of the  
to create icons for one's own benefit. The fear of doing angels surrounded by the  
idolatry and the fear of doing heresy became a soldered plane more and more  
balancing act. The idea of the totally obsolete felt like a reminder that the angels are  
and devotional service of true orthodox contemporarily one of the most harshly  
icon painters was somehow the most drawn subject matters, particularly painted  
radical charge to the idea of being or tattooed by the many inflicted ones, by the  
the iconoclastic artist I was. prisoners, by people suffering just incredible pains,  
So at last I found the or the ones feeling humiliated or feeling deeply  
angel somehow, during abandoned and submitted to endless harsh and  
production strongly almost unpaid labor across many countries, those  
and almost entirely intensely seeking and praying for relief and for charity. Usually  
framed in the such depictions of angels appear ugly and scary to the proud  
tin metal from and educated ones, but paradoxically the harder they are the  
contemporary closer they are in fact to the true angelic spirit of charity.

Mexican icon  
painters  
during  
the

Once, for one of my exhibitions I felt determined to abandon  
everything I had done before in order to make space for  
something new, to make a hard cut with all of my exhibitions  
from  
before, at least. But I had to learn by making such grave  
artistic mistakes, like negating all my existing work modes  
which led me into a maelstrom, a time of lonely exile,  
and into a multitude of desperations, and sleepless and dark  
felt nights. By that time it had all got so oppressive and even physically  
painful, that when once suddenly I imagined I would do  
the very same thing as before instead of the new then, as if  
touched by the sacred fairy both I myself, and even the  
world around me seemed happy again.

In this very moment of sudden relief, my former  
phantom intentions vanished in the much  
more far reaching decision: I will try  
to produce the same angels again  
that I tried doing already  
earlier in the last  
exhibition  
and  
of being an angel painter,  
but the intuition of the to  
me so unrecognized  
and earlier perceived as  
unproductive love  
that is  
contained  
within  
them.

Josef Strau  
*Engel mit Retuschierungen*, 2023  
Digital image retouch on adhesive paper  
29,5 × 21 cm (11 5/8" × 8 1/4")



Josef Strau  
*New Angel 6*, 2021  
Tin, solder, enamel and marker on canvas  
40 × 50 cm (15 3/4" × 19 5/8")







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June 30 - July 29, 2023



Anna Virnich

*Untitled (#15)*, 2014

Silk, yarn on wooden stretch frame / Seide, Garn auf Holzkeilrahmen  
180 × 119 cm (70 7/8" × 46 7/8")





Detail



*A Crooked World*  
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June 30 - July 29, 2023



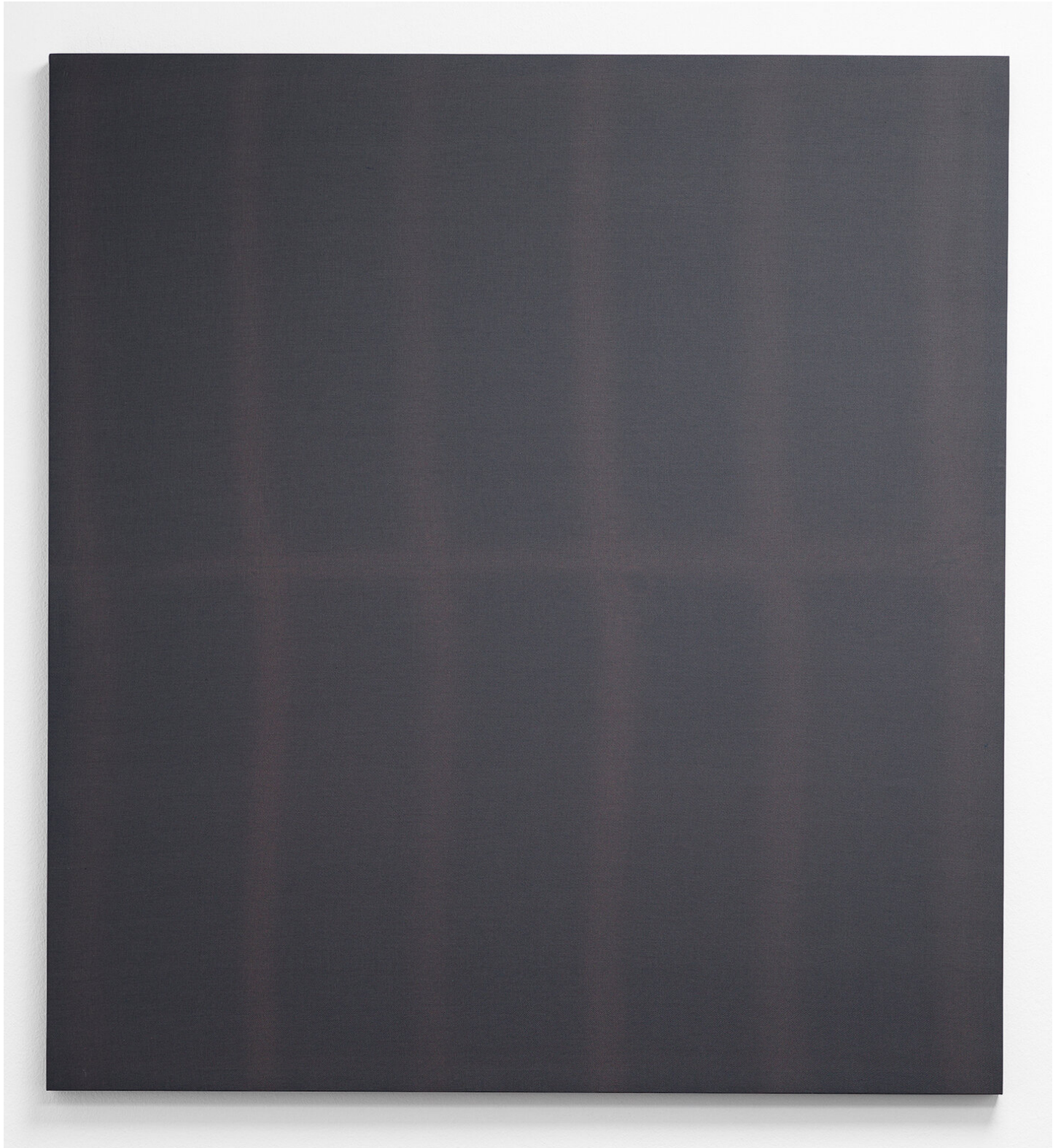
*A Crooked World*  
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June 30 - July 29, 2023

Anna Virnich

*Fever*, 2014

Sunburned cotton on wooden stretch frame / Sonnengebleichte Baumwolle auf Holzkeilrahmen

130 × 120 cm (51 1/8" × 47 1/4")





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Coumba Samba  
*Rubber Door (for Box)*, 2023  
Rubber, paint, thumbtacks on wood  
192 × 76 × 6 cm (75 5/8" × 29 7/8" × 2 3/8")







Detail



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June 30 - July 29, 2023

Matthias Groebel  
*Hacked Channels 07*, 1999  
Acrylic on canvas  
115 × 100 cm (45 1/4" × 39 3/8")





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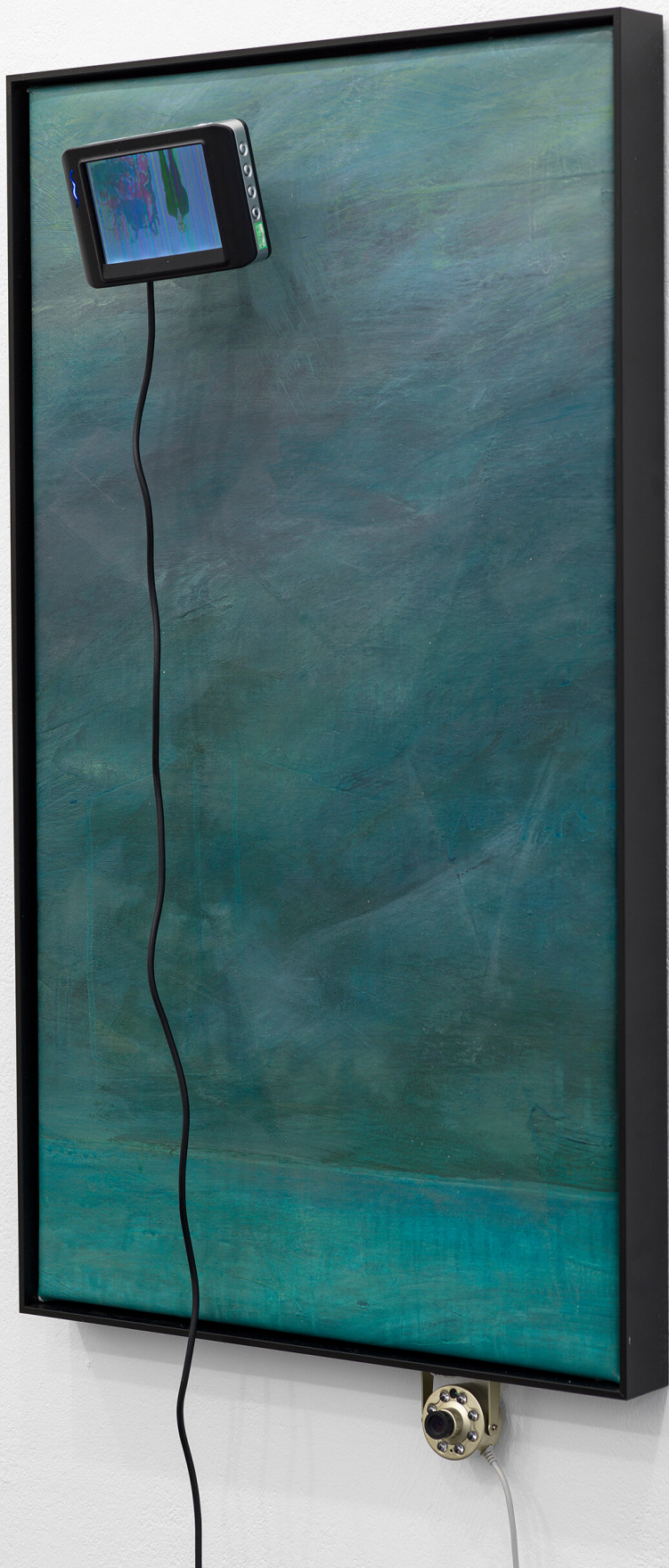
Julia Scher

*Security Landscape of the Year*, 1982/ 2012

Surveillance system, brackets, acrylic and plaster on tarpaulin, mdf, screws, transformers

Painting panels excluding objects: 64 × 37 × 2,5 cm (25 1/4" × 14 5/8" × 1")





Julia Scher

*Security Landscape of the Year*, 1982/ 2012

Surveillance system, brackets, acrylic and plaster on tarpaulin, mdf, screws, transformers

Painting panels excluding objects: 64 × 37 × 2,5 cm (25 1/4" × 14 5/8" × 1")









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Coumba Samba

*Evisu*, 2023

Label paper, thumbtacks, paint on canvas  
30 × 30 cm (11 3/4" × 11 3/4")





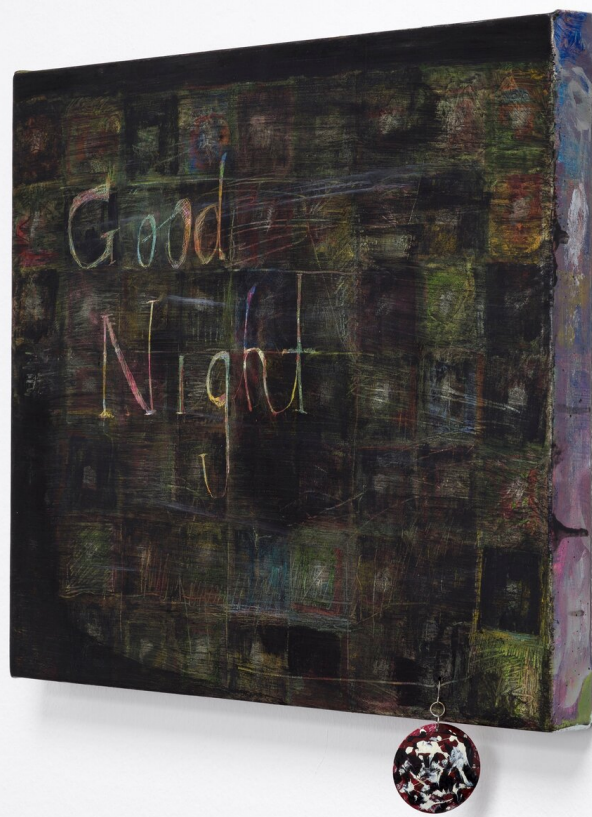
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June 30 - July 29, 2023



*A Crooked World*  
Drei, Cologne  
June 30 - July 29, 2023

Whitney Claflin  
*Monuments Blinking*, 2023  
Oil on canvas with enamel on found earring  
Canvas: 38 × 46 cm (15" × 18 1/8")









*A Crooked World*  
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June 30 - July 29, 2023

Whitney Claflin

*Did It*, 2023

Oil, enamel, acrylic on poly rayon blend, nails, wire  
23 × 30 cm (9" × 11 3/4")

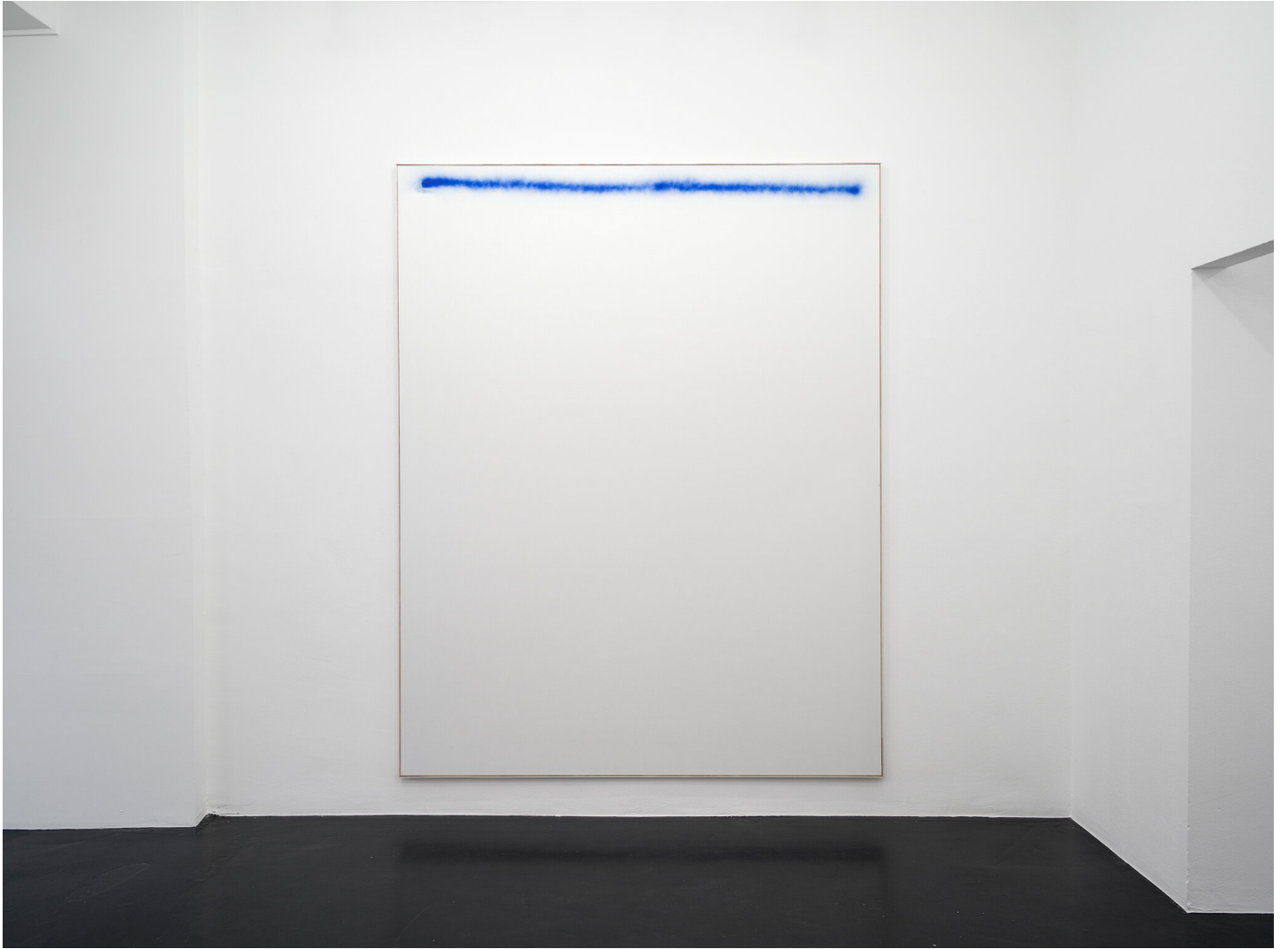




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Drei, Cologne  
June 30 - July 29, 2023

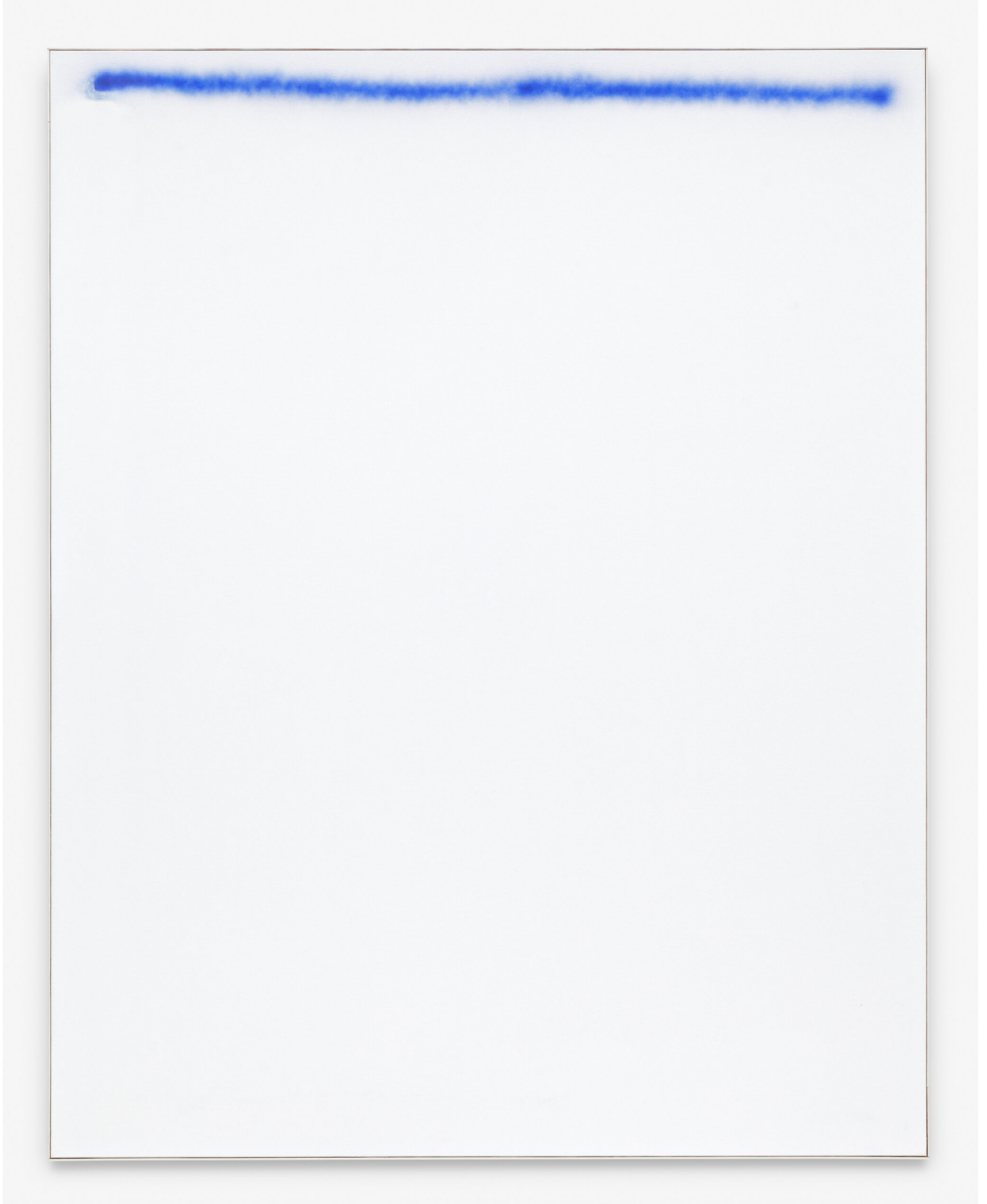


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David Ostrowski  
*F (Sky's the limit)*, 2014  
Acrylic and lacquer on canvas; wood frame  
241 × 191 cm (94 7/8" × 75 1/4")





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*A Crooked World*  
Drei, Cologne  
June 30 - July 29, 2023



Julia Scher  
*Untitled*, 1981  
Mixed media on canvas  
61 × 91,5 cm (24" × 36")



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